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SUBJECT: INTERPELLATION RESPONSE: HISTORIC DAY FOR ARAB DEMOCRACY?

REF: A. KUWAIT 1147

[B.](#) KUWAIT 623

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Grueling Grilling Strengthens GoK

[11.](#) (C) Updating ref A's interpellation account, though tribalist and Islamist MPs secured late on December 8 the requisite 10 votes to call for a December 16 vote of non-cooperation against the PM, the initial public reaction to the marathon grilling of PM Shaykh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al Sabah was that the outcome is triumph for the PM and the GOK. According to interlocutors, Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi's decision to hold a closed door session allowed for a more congenial atmosphere than the haranguing that usually characterizes open sessions. The PM acknowledged afterward that though he questioned some procedural matters, the session proceeded "with class." Initial reports also suggested that some fireworks occurred (as expected) during Interior Minister Shaykh Jaber Al-Khalid Al-Jaber Al Sabah's session with his chief detractor MP Musallam Al-Barak over charges that Shaykh Jaber provided misleading testimony during his previous June interpellation (ref B). Like the PM, Shaykh Jaber will face a vote of no confidence on December 17. The sessions for Public Works Minister Fadel Safer Ali Safer and Defense Minister Shaykh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al Sabah -- which lasted until 5:00 AM on March 9 with the MPs ordering in both dinner and breakfast -- proceeded in a less eventful fashion: questions on their performances were raised, but no motions of no confidence were filed. No further action is anticipated on their cases, while the Interior Minister's future is likely less rosy (beyond his Parliamentary detractors, he is on the outs with the PM, so the GoK has little incentive to advocate on his behalf with the National Assembly).

Historic Day for Arab Democracy?

[12.](#) (C) If on December 16 opposition MPs secure a simple majority of the 50 votes (the 16 ministers as ex officio MPs do not vote in such cases), Constitutional Article 102 states that the Amir "may either relieve the Prime Minister of office and appoint a new Cabinet or dissolve the National Assembly." Yet public reaction suggests the PM's image was strengthened by his facing and enduring the grueling, six-hour closed-door session. Embassy interlocutors, including former Information Minister Dr. Saad Al-Ajmi (liberal), Constitutional analyst Dr. Mohammed Al-Mqate (Islamist), and Islamic Constitutional Movement's (ICM) political advisor Mohammed Al-Dallal (Islamist) conveyed to poloffs their predictions that Shaykh Nasser, "the first Arab head of government to be impeached," would easily survive the

December 16 vote of non-cooperation. Early tallies suggest that some 30 MPs have already stated their support for the PM and another six have indicated an inclination to do so, putting the opposition's target of 26 well beyond reach.

¶3. (C) Interlocutors -- normally prone to criticize the GoK for its perceived weak leadership -- told poloffs that in its handling of the grillings, the GoK skillfully employed parliamentary tactics and gained the upper hand in the ongoing confrontation with tribalists. These interlocutors believe that the public will now see its leadership in a new light. While the ramifications of the grilling of the PM and three Ministers will only emerge with time, early indications from a diverse canvass of Kuwaiti political operatives are:

-- First and foremost, the balance between the ruling Al Sabah family and the elected Parliament may have shifted slightly December 8, but shift it did. The PM is a descendent of Mubarak the Great, the founder of modern Kuwait, and a potential contender for the Amiri throne. His submission to grilling (albeit a private one) sends a message to the public that now, only the Amir and Crown Prince are above accountability to the democratic rule of law of the country. The previous effort to grill the PM led to dissolution of the Parliament and new elections. So a Rubicon, if only a very narrow and shallow one, has been crossed.

-- The shift is further reinforced by the fact that three of the four grilled ministers are ruling family members. The decision to allow their interpellations further weakens the class separation (already by far the smallest in the Gulf

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region) between the ruling Al Sabahs and the Kuwaiti populace.

-- Though loath to criticize the Amir directly, interlocutors who previously joked that the only noted accomplishment of the Amir, who came to power in early 2006, was to change the weekend from Thursday-Friday to Friday-Saturday, now credit him as a supporter of improved democratic practices: It was Shaykh Sabah who first separated the positions of Crown Prince and Prime Minister, and then later gave permission for the PM to be grilled. He then ordered his ministers, including the PM, to stand for the grilling. This facing down of detractors by the four ministers may lead to an emboldening of ministers in confronting charges (and perhaps, it is hoped, empower them to be more vigorous in the conduct of their duties).

-- The session is generally perceived to have weakened, at least temporarily, the tribalist veto in Kuwaiti politics. Three of the four MPs who launched the interpellations hail from the Al-Mutairi tribe, the fourth from the Al-Otaibi. Should they fail to secure enough votes for non-cooperation against the PM, as expected, they will face an emboldened and more unified parliament less intimidated by tribalist and Islamist antics.

Comment:

¶4. (C) These impressions, of course, are preliminary and may also reflect a deep-seated desire by most members of the intelligentsia here (whether liberal or conservative), to see Kuwait's government demonstrate greater leadership and move forward with projects to modernize the nation. Should the habitual parliamentary-government squabbling and stasis resume, these relatively rosy assessments of the December 8 events will likely darken. Whatever the outcome, this has been a significant developmental step for Kuwait's democratic institutions. For the moment, both sides of the aisle have something to celebrate: the parliamentarians have exerted their constitutional right to challenge the PM, no matter his pedigree, and the PM is feeling triumphant. His senior

advisor (and former Amiri 'chef du cabinet') Faisal al-Hajji called Ambassador last night to pulse our assessment of the outcome, offering his perspective (and presumably the PM's) that by confronting these "frivolous accusations" the government had taken the wind (or hot air) out of the sails of those parliamentarians simply seeking opportunities to grandstand instead of tackling national priorities.

Ambassador applauded the Amir's commitment to avoiding a parliamentary dissolution of any kind, noting the the U.S. Administration knew better than most how difficult democracy was, but it was a struggle worth making. End comment.

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